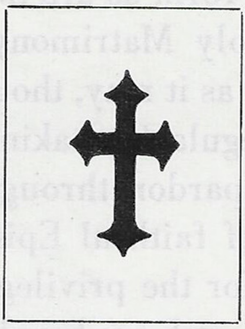

Penance in the Prayer Book

By The Reverend
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A NATIONAL GUILD OF CHURCHMEN TRACT

PENANCE IN THE PRAYER BOOK

Penance in the Prayer Book—is you is, or is you ain't? You is and you ain't!

Now the Sacrament of Holy Penance has gained entrance into the Prayer Book by the back door, as it were, and therefore it is somewhat in hiding. It is there by direction, yet it is not there in clear form as are the Sacraments of Holy Confirmation, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders and Holy Unction. Be that as it may, thousands of faithful Episcopalians are regularly making their confessions and receiving God's pardon through their parish priests. Thousands more of faithful Episcopalians are hopefully reaching out for the privilege of this Sacrament of Holy Penance. All such are keenly aware of the fact that they must do something about their sins. They are unwilling merely to accept these sins callously on the theory that "everybody does it." They refuse to compliment themselves on how natural it is to wander astray like lost sheep.

You see our blessed Lord "came to seek and to save that which was lost." He came on earth as Incarnate Lord and Good Shepherd to find the lost sheep and restore it to the Father's fold. The first word of the gracious Lord's first sermon was "repent." This first sermon recorded in the seventeenth verse of the fourth chapter of Saint Matthew's Gospel is poignantly laconic: "Repent; for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." Now the Incarnate Son of God took the repentance he found working in the world before His coming, as well as that preached by His forerunner, Saint John the Baptist, at the beginning of His Divine Mission on earth, and added to it a Sacrament. This He did on the night of His glorious resurrection from the dead when He appeared to His Apostles and as He breathed on them said "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." What a wonderful setting the institution of this Sacrament of Holy Penance had, namely, the showing of the sacred wounds of the Crucified but Risen Saviour, those signs of atoning sacrifice, those symbols of our forgiveness.

The Apostles shared their authority to forgive sins through this Sacrament of Holy Penance with the priests whom they set apart for the Sacred Priesthood. To this day in the Episcopal Church the bishops, our modern apostles, share the authority to forgive sins when they ordain a new priest with the solemn words "Receive

the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained."

Now the priestly absolution that has been authorized by the Holy Catholic Church from the earliest times until the present day is the means instituted for enabling sinners to appropriate the atonement, to receive forgiveness of sins, to be reconciled to the Father from whom they have strayed as wayward sinners. The favorite parable of the Prodigal Son is fraught with rich meaning for us the minute each of us recognizes God as his Father and himself as the Prodigal Son, endowed with a free will which he has abused by choosing that evil which separates from God but which he may use by returning to God through repentance and confession to be rewarded with the kiss of pardon and an invitation to the heavenly Banquet.

The early Christian Church, her heroes and her faithful, placed Penance on a high pedestal among spiritual blessings. Penance was thought of along with Baptism as a *sacrament of the dead,* since it raised the sinner from spiritual death to spiritual life. Indeed Penance has ever been thought of as a gateway to the *sacraments of the living*. This is why it has been happily natural for a Christian to make his confession before Holy Confirmation, Holy Communion, Holy Matrimony, Holy Orders or Holy Unction. Saint Chrysostom in his second homily proclaimed "Penance induces the sinner cheerfully to undergo every rigor: his heart is pierced with contrition, his lips utter the confession of his guilt and his actions breathe humility and are accepted by God as a satisfaction." Saint Jerome calls Penance the "Second plank after the shipwreck of sin,"—the first plank of course being Baptism.

But what of Penance in the American Book of Common Prayer? In the first place, in the ordination service for priests on page 546 the newly ordained priest is commissioned to forgive or to retain sins. Here the priest is set apart to be a judge,—that is, he is to decide whether a penitent's contrition is sincerely honest, thereby making him a subject of God's pardon, or whether a penitent's attitude is dishonest and lacking in any semblance of contrition, thereby making it necessary for him to prove himself worthy of God's pardon at some future time. How, it may fairly be questioned,

could a priest exercise this godly judgment if the sinners of his congregation, and this means all of his congregation, were to be content with making a General Confession *en masse?* One wonders!

In the Order for Daily Morning Prayer on page 7, the *Declaration of Absolution* or *Remission of Sins* may be made by the priest alone, for to him alone, not to a deacon or layreader, has God in ordination granted 'power and commandment' to forgive sins. This Declaration is no ordinary prayer, else it would not be reserved for the priest's lips only. It is offered to those who fulfill the requirements for pardon, namely, to those who "truly repent and unfeignedly believe his Holy Gospel." There then follows a prayer that these requirements may be fulfilled by every member of the congregation as long as life shall last.

In the Order for Daily Evening Prayer on page 24, the priest alone gives the same *Declaration of Absolution* or *Remission of Sins* as in Morning Prayer, with the possibility of using an alternative form for *Absolution* or *Remission* given immediately following this Declaration.

In the Order for Holy Communion, after the General Confession, the priest (or bishop if he be present) exercises his authority to declare God's pardon as he says the words of absolution given on page 76. Then on the bottom of page 87 as part of the Exhortation, whereby communicants are warned that they are to receive Holy Communion only after careful and honest preparation, are these words: "And because it is requisite that no man should come to the holy Communion, but with a full trust in God's mercy and with a quiet conscience: therefore, if there be any of you, that by this means (referring to preceding paragraph) cannot quiet his own conscience herein, let him come to me or to some other Minister of God's Word and open his grief; that he may receive such godly counsel and advice, as may tend to the quieting of his conscience and the removing of all scruple and doubtfulness." It would appear therefore that in certain cases penitents who cannot quiet their own consciences, and it would also appear from the grim faces of most sinners that their consciences have not been quieted, may seek out their parish priest and confess their sins and have their scruple and doubtfulness as to God's forgiveness removed by priestly absolution. Indeed the same exhortation in the English Prayer Book states that upon

opening their grief such penitents are to receive "the benefit of absolution, together with ghostly counsel and advice, to the quieting of conscience and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness."

In the Order for the Visitation of the Sick on page 313 we find this rubric: "Then shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feel his conscience troubled with any matter; after which confession, on evidence of his repentance, the Minister shall assure him of God's mercy and forgiveness." In the English Prayer Book this rubric concludes: "After which confession, the Priest shall absolve him (if he humbly and heartily desire it) after this sort:—

> "Our Lord Jesus Christ who hath left power to his Church to absolve all sinners who truly repent and believe in him, of his great mercy forgive thee thine offences: And by his authority committed to me, I absolve thee from all thy sins, In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Furthermore, in the American Order for the Visitation of the Sick on page 319, when a person is apparently dying the priest just before he commends the soul gives this Absolution: "The Almighty and merciful Lord grant thee pardon and remission of all thy sins, and the grace and comfort of the Holy Spirit. Amen."

What may we gather from this cursory study of confession and absolution in the American Prayer Book? Well, we may sense an Eighteenth Century shyness, to put it mildly,—a shyness befitting a time when superstition and sacramentalism were synonymous terms. However, in the Preface in the American Book of Common Prayer on Page VI it is stated: "It will also appear that this Church is far from intending to depart from the Church of England in any essential point of doctrine, discipline or worship; or further than local circumstances require." Now the Church of England in her Book of Common Prayer is less shy about confession of sins and absolution and there are not a few of the priests and bishops of the Episcopal Church who are less shy and who regularly administer the Sacrament of Holy Penance (commonly called Confession) to the very many less shy and very many honestly faithful members of Holy Church. The consciences of these latter do honestly trouble them and it is only God's merciful pardon granted through His authorized agents (priests and bishops) that can calm these troubled con-

sciences. Those who claim that their consciences do not trouble them are either living in a Fool's Paradise of their own wishful thinking or else they resemble those who claim they are 'not good enough' to go to church or to receive Holy Communion but who actually are living in a state of neutral indifference.

In *The Faith of the Church,* Volume III of a series of books on the Church's Teaching issued under the *imprimatur* of the National Council, we are happy to find that Absolution, along with Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony and Anointing or Unction, is listed as a rite which has the character of a Sacrament. To be sure some shyness still prevails (we Episcopalians are naively conservative), yet we are grateful that the authors of this excellent volume declare that "the Prayer Book includes among the functions of a priest the duty of pronouncing Absolution" and that in General Confession of sins "a confession should always involve a genuine acknowledgment of actual sins as well as a more general statement of one's sinfulness," and that "many Christians, including those who are in good physical health, have found it helpful to make a private and specific acknowledgment of their sins to God through sacramental confession in the presence of a priest of the Church." Yes, the shyness begins to turn into the naturalness of rugged honesty whereby sinners as returning prodigals will beg God's mercy and crave His gracious pardon through the Sacrament of His mercy and pardon,—Holy Penance. Whether this Sacrament is administered in a confessional box or at one end of the Communion rail, it little matters.

Now let us be practical. *There* is the overwhelming mercy of God and *here* is a sinner in need of that mercy. *There* is the almighty love of God and *here* is the sinner who has outraged that love through his rebellion or indifference. *There* is the Lamb of Calvary, right now pleading the merits of His Passion in heaven, and *here* is the sinner depending on those merits for his salvation. *There* is the priest authorized by Holy Church to apply those merits to the individual soul and *here* is the sinner needing to experience those saving merits in the forgiveness of his sins. *There* is the Sacrament of Holy Penance, commonly called Confession, and *here* is the sinner with his troubled conscience that always accompanies sin, whose conscience can be calmed only as the guilt of his sins is lifted.

What does the sinner do? He goes to his parish priest

and asks him to prepare him for his first confession. During this preparation his priest assures him of the great love of God toward him, the love that sent the Divine Son into the world, the love that took that Son to the Cross of Calvary there to pay the price of the redemption of the entire human race from its sins, the love that provided for the Sacrament of Holy Penance on the first Easter night that redemption might be appropriated by the individual sinner through the sacramental forgiveness of sins. Then his priest tells him of *his* part in the sacramental forgiveness, namely, contrition, confession and satisfaction. He helps him to see his sins in the light of the love of the Crucified and in the light of what those sins do to God and in this light to be genuinely sorry for these sins. This genuine sorrow because it is born out of love for God is contrition and not merely remorse. His priest then explains to him the need for confessing his sins one by one, without explanation and without excuses but rather as a matter of fact. Such a need is the sinner's need and not God's need. God already knows the penitent's sins for his soul is naked to God but the penitent needs to know his sins else he fights life's battle in the dark. Too, the priest hearing his confession needs to know his sins that he may render proper counsel. Then his parish priest warns the penitent that he must offer satisfaction for his sins, pointing out to him that whereas his Lord Jesus Christ has offered perfect satisfaction of the Father's justice on the Cross, yet He allows His individual follower to share in that satisfaction just as He allows him to share in the perfect sorrow that He offered in Gethsemane as He agonized over the view of the sins of the whole world. This satisfaction in which the sinner must share means the willingness on the sinner's part to satisfy the Father's justice by accepting cheerfully any penalty his sins have deserved, performing any acts of penance suggested as necessary or helpful and making acts of reparation, restitution and amendment. All of this means that he, the sinner, gladly shares the humiliation of Jesus Christ his Savior who, though He knew no sin, "humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." His parish priest then shows him just how to examine his conscience, just how to make his confession, and suggests to him the need, not luxury, of regularity in making his confessions. He points out that this need is common to all.

Oh, the joy of the sinner's first confession and every confession thereafter! In the Sacrament of Holy Penance the sinner experiences the mercy of God for he is no longer content with theorizing about this mercy. At a given time, in a given place and at the hands of a given priest, he is forgiven his sins by Almighty God, nor merely assured of the possibility of future forgiveness. His pardon is an accomplished fact as he hears those gracious words "I absolve thee from all thy sins." His entire guilt is lifted from his soul. His entire indebtedness to God, which he has run up by his sins, is cancelled. The slate of his soul is clean. He starts life all over again, restored to loving union with the Father from whom he has strayed as a wayward sinful child. His love is heightened, his humility is deepened, his enthusiasm to go on living is unbounded. Best of all, the day of his pardon is a festival day for heaven since "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." Indeed the pardoned sinner has returned to fellowship with God and his saints in heaven, which fellowship had been broken by his unforgiven sins.

After confession comes calm reflection. The pardoned sinner is aware that he has procured from the counsel of his father confessor proper medicines and prescriptions for his spiritual maladies, since his father confessor has acted as a physician for his soul. In some measure his doubts have been cleared up, his sorrows have received comfort and he has learned of remedies to be used in the thick of the battle of temptation to save himself from going under. That troubled, wounded conscience of his has been eased. What is more, the grace that God has poured into his soul through this Sacrament has rectified many an error and enlightened much ignorance and restrained many an uncontrolled passion. He has been taught to be happy in despising himself in proportion as he has gained a brighter vision of the love of God. He looks forward not to his next sin (as those who oppose confession affirm) but to his next experience of God's merciful pardon should he be worsted and wounded in his honest fight on life's battlefield against his three arch foes—the world and its call to all that money can buy, the flesh and its call to unrestrained passion and the devil and his call to conceited cleverness.

It is not the purpose of this brief tract on so important a subject to deal with the objections to confession

of sins in the Sacrament of Holy Penance. The writer has long since learned that such objections, ninety-nine percent of them at least, come from those who have never made a sacramental confession. Rather it is the purpose of this tract if possible lovingly to persuade one who has never experienced the joy of a sacramental confession to experience this joy as he hears a priest confessor at the conclusion of the administration of this sacrament say "Go in peace. The Lord hath put away all thy sins." It is the devout hope of the writer that many readers may be wholesomely natural in their religion. As they quite naturally become wayward children, so equally naturally may they go back to their heavenly Father from whom they have strayed.

We live in an age that seems to be fairly grim. The children of men go through life accumulating problems. These problem-ladened souls are rushing to the offices of psychiatrists where their problems are aired on 'confession couches'. Actually most of these problems are not problems at all but rather wrong relationships which may be rightly adjusted in 'confession boxes'. You see, so-called problems, generally speaking, mean a broken relationship with God. Restored relationship is possible only through God's pardon, sought through contrition, confession and willingness to make satisfaction. The relationship which hell held with the sinner is then broken as the soul of the sinner is returned to a state of grace through the forgiveness of sins which only God can give. This is why hell curses when a penitent makes his confession, while heaven rejoices. The virtues which God has planted in every individual, sinner though he may be, are revived when the right relationship with God is restored. Therefore when the sinner makes his confession it is not a question of taking a problem to God for solution, but it is rather a question of taking a broken or weak relationship for restoration or strengthening.

Pray, dear reader, that you yourself and countless numbers of the children of God may experience in the Sacrament of Holy Penance the infinite love and mercy of the Lamb of Calvary and that through this experience you may be raised from the dunghill to the mount of transformation.

"Our sins, not thine, thou bearest, Lord,
Make us thy sorrow feel,
Till through our pity and our shame
Love answers love's appeal."

Peter Abelard

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4